

THE X-BIRD FILES

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In the May 1999 *Kickshaws*, Dave Morice said that he encountered (in print) a Xantusiid lizard, and wondered whether there are any other X-animals. As an avid birdwatcher, I can answer his question for the feathered portion of the animal kingdom. Of course, I am assuming he is talking about X-birds in the onomastic sense and not in the sense that John Cleese used the term when complaining about his lifeless parrot.

Most birds have more than one word in their common name. Of the roughly ten thousand species of birds in the world, I know of only ten which have a word in their name beginning with X. Two of them were named after a 19th-century Hungarian named John Xantus. Xantus's murrelet is a seabird in the same family as auks and puffins; I saw some two years ago on a pelagic trip off of Los Angeles. Xantus's hummingbird is endemic to Baja California. Xavier's greenbul is an African bulbul; there are so many similar-looking species of these drab little greenbuls in Africa that bird watchers make jokes about the difficulties in telling them apart. And there is the Xinjiang ground-jay, named after the region in China in which it is found.

In addition to these four, there are also two types of birds with X-names. In Central and South America, there is a type of bird called a xenops, which is in the ovenbird family. These small brown insectivores have stiff tails and nest in tree cavities, unlike some of their relatives who build the oven-like nests from which the family gets its name. There are five species of xenops: rufous-tailed, slender-billed, plain, streaked, and great. In addition there is a South American cotinga called a xenopsarais, or white-naped xenopsaris. It is the only bird in its genus. It is a tiny gray and white bird with a black cap.

I would bore you all to tears were I to describe all of the birds whose scientific names have a word beginning with X; there are more than 25 genus names and more than 40 species names for these. I know of two for which both the species and the genus names begin with X. The yellow-headed blackbird, which is a fairly common bird in the marshes of the western United States, is *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*. Those of you who have studied Greek can see that each name simply means "yellow head". One of the reasons there are so many species names beginning with X is that there are a lot of birds in the world with at least some yellow feathers! Another double-X bird is *Xenopirostris xenopirostris*, a shrike found in Madagascar. There are no orders of birds beginning with X and only one family, the Xenicidae, which includes four species of New Zealand wrens.